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# PSYCHOANALYSIS AND RELIGION

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Psychoanalysis leads to the real motives in behavior, in contrast with supposed or professed motives. It may thus serve to reveal a person's true self, and so reinforce religious self-searching.

Psychoanalysis would clarify religious controversy by disclosing the actual motives lying behind religious attitudes.

The real reasons for the success or the failure of devices in religious education would appear. Mixed or obscured motives in the teacher could be evaluated in the interests of a more sincere educational process.

A suggested list of subconscious interests in religious belief and action is given to indicate the direction in which inquiry would be led.

A new technique for religious development would be made possible by an understanding of sublimation.

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## I

The most valuable illumination that psychoanalysis has to offer is that touching the disparity between real motives on the one hand and alleged or avowed, professed or supposed, motives on the other. The problem of psychoanalysis may, with close approximation to exactness, be characterized as the ascertainment of the real motive, using the word "motive," of course, as interchangeable with the "wish" or the "desire" of the psychoanalytic writers. Whether in dreams or in neuroses or in ordinary waking experience, one motive is consciously professed while another is half-consciously or subconsciously or unconsciously entertained. In a dream, our apparent concern may be to escape a pursuing beast or foe, although our real concern may be something sexual. The neurotic may suffer from insomnia the underlying purport of which may be an Oedipus or Electra complex. A politician may believe himself devoted to social reform, yet, could he look deeply into himself, he might discover his real motive to be self-aggrandizement, while the expert analyst probing still deeper might discern who knows what infantile sadistic or exhibitionistic vestiges.

There is such a thing as taking stock of one's self. Periods of self-examination for winnowing the true motives from the presumed are enjoined by all religions. "Search me, O God, and know my ways; try me and know my thoughts," said the Psalmist. Nor is the elaborate apparatus of psychoanalysis always necessary in order to expose the duality. "Ofttimes a work seemeth to be of charity," says Thomas à Kempis, "and it is rather a work of the flesh; because natural inclination, self-will, hope of reward, and desire of our own interest are motives seldom absent." The outbreaks of petulance on the part of persons engaged in public or charitable endeavors betray only too frequently the dominance of the *amour propre* in the background over the altruism in the foreground.

In the domain of controversy and in the domain of education and consequently in the domain of religion embracing, as this does, controversial and educational tasks, these considerations are of overwhelming significance.

The paramount theme in every contention is duplicity of motive. Where such is not suspected and insinuated, altercation and its handmaid, sarcasm, have scant food for subsistence. "Wilson found it necessary to cancel the G.A.R. appointment but he did have leisure to address the Confederate veterans." "The church is solicitous for the salvation of your soul; of course, prayers and masses cost money." "He hasn't any money to pay his debts but he does have money for a trip to the coast." "Congress can appropriate billions for military purposes and millions for the study of hogs, fish, and chickens, but it takes years to get a small appropriation for child and maternity welfare." "He cannot attend church; he is too busy at the card table." All querulous censures seem to be directed not so much at the assumedly real motive of the person censured as at the presumed discrepancy between the real motive and the avowed. Hypocrisy is the most prolific of charges.

The motive predicated of us by our antagonist is as likely to be false as the motive defensively avowed by ourselves. Never-

theless, all controversy appears to move in the sphere of motives that are seldom real but nearly always assumed. Spinoza is probably right in his assertion that, could we glimpse the real motives of ourselves and of others, there would be no antipathies and consequently no quarrels. The real motives on both sides of any quarrel are perhaps mutually more tolerable than the instinctive concealment of them would imply.

Or take the matter of education. The application of psychoanalysis to pedagogy is undoubtedly among the hopeful prospects of the future. Interest and sympathy are fundamental in education, but where are interest and sympathy rooted if not in the individual's motives? To awaken interest and sympathy is the problem of the school mistress and of the statesman alike. From the games of the nursery to the persuasion of the world, success depends upon the effectiveness of the appeal to the desires by which human beings are actuated. Tact and diplomacy, indispensable in the kindergarten as on the rostrum are also akin to the perception of underlying motivations. One's own self-discipline requires such knowledge; speed or dilatoriness, achievement or failure, depending upon the connection established or not yet established between the subject of study on the one hand and our innermost proclivities on the other.

## II

Let us now apply these thoughts to the questions of religious controversy and religious education.

The interminable disputations in the religious domain are due to misapprehension of motives. While tenets and ceremonies are the ostensible points at issue, motives are the actual factors involved. Yet each side is misinformed concerning its own no less than concerning its opponent's real motives. The flimsy logic and the conspicuous irritability characterizing these discussions evidence this; as also the fact that controversy ceases, although no other agreement is reached, the very moment that one side recognizes the "sincerity," that is, the worthy

motivation of the other. When controversy is at its bitterest, each side affirms its own motive to be justice and truth, with falsehood, greed, or arrogance as the motive of the other side. Even when the antagonism is mild, the intimations of error with which the opponent is charged carry with them the insinuation that there are volitional causes of the error, "wilful error," as the phrase goes. In this spirit "Homousion" has fought "Homoiousion," Atheist has been arrayed against Theist and Theist against Atheist, Trinitarian has contended with Unitarian, Protestant with Catholic, Liberal with Conservative, Rabbinite with Karaite, Pharisee with Sadducee, and thus throughout the history of religious conflict.

But what if investigation were to show family affection or self-preservation or "free exercise of personality" or even the sexual inexorabilities to be the true motives involved? Yes, what if behind the diversity of doctrine there should prove to be an identity of purpose? What if it were to develop that "the objects on both sides are virtually the same," as President Wilson said of the belligerents in the Great War? Obviously the course of the controversy would be profoundly affected. How much less sterile, in all events, religious discussion would become could we grapple with the real points at issue and cease to flounder among the spurious points! We would no longer reply to him who is inordinately attached to his social group, by proving that the earth revolves around the sun or to him who is enamored of his ancestry by demonstrating that the Pentateuch is of post-exilic origin.

Relative to all of this we might then proceed to put to psychoanalysis some further questions. We have observed that loyalty to truth can be a motive avowed although not actually cherished. Does it ever happen, however, that avowal and fact coincide? Is there such a thing as perfect objectivity, devotion to truth unalloyed?

Again, would a person completely devoted to truth be likely to engage in controversy? Is the truth-seeking attitude com-

patible with the controversial attitude? The familiar psychoanalytic term for the truth-seeking attitude is "the reality principle." Can the susceptibility toward disputation harmonize with the reality principle? Is not perhaps the very soul of controversy non-reality, its very essence that misconstruction of motives in one's self and in others already discussed?

Another possible query is this: The "reality principle" itself—may it not be a special manifestation of something more nearly fundamental such as "the instinct of self-preservation" or "the instinct of grappling with the world" or whatever else psychoanalysis may divulge? One is reminded in this connection of the pragmatic school in philosophy which regards truth as "that which works out in practice." Reality is, according to pragmatism, an attribute of man's handling of the universe rather than of the universe independent of human reaction. Were psychoanalysis to find the reality principle to be a phase of some deeper "self-preservation" or "world-confronting" principle, its conclusions would be, in a marked degree, ancillary to those of the pragmatic philosophy.

### III

We proceed now to the question of education in the religious domain, using "education" in a sense broad enough to include not merely preaching and instruction but all forms of propaganda, persuasion, inspiration, and edification. The problem, here as elsewhere, bifurcates into two questions: (1) What is the end in view? (2) What are the means best adapted to the end?

Before answering the first of these questions, it may be necessary to meet the preliminary question whether the end of religious endeavor is something that admits of verbal expression. Language is fully capable of designating the subordinate ends of life such as health, food, shelter, order, recreation, lawfulness, etc., which are themselves but means toward higher and larger ends. Whether life's ultimate end is amenable to lin-

guistic designation is not easy to decide and yet, when religion is under consideration, we may not stop short of life's ultimate end. What is the measure of adequacy of such words as "God," "Salvation," "Love," "Personality," "Self-realization," "Life more abundant," "Heaven," etc., as denominatives of the final goal? Even should we fail to justify these terms as nomenclature for life's ultimate, we may still find their use warrantable as indexes of the direction in which the ultimate lies. They may, in mathematical parlance, be variables though not constants. They may be signposts though not the destination.

Outside of the religious domain, it does not require unusual introspection to disclose the ends that are sought. Where the object is to learn a science or a language, to amass wealth, to enact a law, to institute a social reform and the like, the end is some definite, clear-cut, objective state of affairs. With the religious ends, it is otherwise. In religious teleology, the entire human personality is involved and this includes of course the unconscious which is said to be the greater part of that personality. The more, therefore, that we understand the unconscious, the more we shall comprehend regarding the ends of human existence. The *summum bonum* must remain a mystery as long as the greater part of the personality seeking the *summum bonum* abides in mystery.

The same must be said about religious methodology. Not only for the sake of interest and sympathy already noted as essential in all education but for additional and unique reasons must religion disinter the motives underlying. Since the ends involve the entire personality, including the unconscious, the means must reckon with the unconscious. The unconscious belongs to the very raw material of religious education. It is that which is to receive the education. What, for instance, is the unconscious utility and effect of our customary religious equipment and resources, literary, musical, artistic, architectural, oratorical, financial, social? For good or for ill what is

the unconscious potency of our churches, songs, phrases, stories, creeds, paintings, sermons, classes, church receptions, and entertainments? That these often fail of their purpose—inspiration, consolation, moralization, or whatever that purpose may be—is patent to the friendliest. Why do they fail? If these means fail, what means will succeed?

Moreover, what is the rôle, in this connection, of the reality principle just alluded to? How shall we who are scientifically inclined substantiate our conviction that obscurantism, dogmatism, and sentimentalism are wrong and that the scientific attitude of undeviating search for facts is ethically as well as physically imperative? Allied to this is the further inquiry: What religious aptitudes, if any, harmonize with the reality principle? Which violate the principle and which affront it most flagrantly?

Even more salient than the motives in the learner's psyche are those in the religious teacher's or leader's psyche. How often is the teacher's character as an individual and his efficiency as an instructor impaired by adulterated motivations. Ambition edges up against aspiration. The desire for prestige, admiration, or financial betterment breaks the singleness of purpose in the religious teacher's soul, perturbs and emasculates his efforts. Add to this the sectarian and the racial, the social and political complications of religious endeavor. Group interests of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews mingle with the true religious motivations in the minds of teachers and learners, leaders and followers alike hampering or preventing progress toward the "highest good." How shall these adulterations be detected and excluded? If psychoanalysis can render assistance on this head, its religious value were inestimable.

#### IV

A tentative division of the field could offer the following lines of inquiry: (1) doctrines; (2) rituals; (3) phrases; (4) various combinations of doctrines, rituals, and phrases figuring in the

preferences and aversions of various individuals. Opposition or aversion to certain doctrines, rituals, and phrases is as important, from our standpoint, as belief and acceptance. The motivation behind the negative is as significant as the motivation behind the affirmative. Indeed, we are told by the psychoanalysts that the unconscious has no negative but that some latent affirmation is the counterpart of every conscious negation. We must therefore probe to the unconscious bases, not only of the belief in God, immortality, miracles, etc., but also of the opposition to those beliefs.

Anterior to any inquiry or real knowledge in the matter, let us, for purely illustrative purposes, venture a few guesses why a given individual or class of individuals may affirm belief in God. (1) Esteem for parents or elders who held and taught that belief. (2) Race or class loyalty. (3) Resentment of the non-believer's implied disrespect for the believer's parents, elders, race, class, or for the believer himself. (4) Unwillingness to "take chances." (5) The domineering instinct. (6) Reluctance to be troubled with doubts and questionings. (7) Dread of public opinion involving jeopardy of monetary, professional, or social prospects. (8) Gratification over escape from some pain or danger. (9) The experience of mystic satisfactions such as "the peace that passeth understanding." Would the psychoanalyst call this experience the sublimation of a disagreeable repression?

It will be noticed, in our conjectural analysis, that we have boldly ignored the "arguments" for belief in God. This is because we are concerned not with "arguments," but with the real reasons. Arguments are camouflage. We should pause for the arguments only long enough to spy out of them the traces of the actual motivations.

Perhaps the expert analyst will find implicated in the God belief factors much different from those conjecturally enumerated above. Like the expert in chemistry, he may discover that what the layman regards as elementary is not an element

but a compound. Esteem for parents, class consciousness, mystic raptures, etc., may in turn admit of analysis into ingredients more rudimentary.

Every religious doctrine should be submitted to psycho-analytic scrutiny, including, as already stated, not only belief in God, immortality, revelation, miracles, atonement, resurrection, transubstantiation, etc., but also the rejection of those beliefs. Curious questions are sure to arise. Here is one: How account for the ascendancy of the illogical in religion? Why are men who are rigidly logical in other matters ready to relax their mental vigilance in matters of creed?

Rituals also should be studied. The recondite motivations behind prayer, genuflections, candles, communion, hymn singing, benedictions, baptism, scripture reading, and the countless other rites should be exhumed. Professed and alleged reasons should speedily be abandoned and diligent search made for the real reasons. We may have to stand prepared for amazing revelations of masochism, sadism, exhibitionism, or of astounding struggles against these and other crudely primitive impulses at the root of the diverse attitudes manifested in ritual matters.

Still more extensive is the field of religious phraseology. What, for instance, was in the psyche of Tertullian when he said "credo quia absurdum" or of the modern conservative when he berates "infidel science"? What is the unconscious import of "God bless you," "The glory of God," "Life everlasting, world without end," "Inner peace," "Inner light," and even the parallels, in real life, to the jest about "that blessed word Mesopotamia"? The entire realm of religious literature would eventually fall within this section of the field. The unique religious potency of the unintelligible should especially receive attention. Why is it that the phrases and books that people understand least are those by which they are edified most? Like the illogical in doctrine, the unintelligible in phraseology is often the most compelling. Why?

Particular stress should be laid upon the emotional concomitants of the several preferences and aversions. In the entire scope of religious expression, there is hardly a doctrine, ritual, or phrase but evokes in diverse individuals or in the same individual at different times, diverse reactions ranging from indifference to martyrdom, from jocularity to tragedy. Why this diversity?

Finally, we encounter the striking combinations of tendencies in various individuals. Why will people accept certain doctrines and rituals while rejecting others even at the cost of glaring inconsistency? There are Jews, for instance, who follow the dietary laws at home yet flout them outside of their homes or who will vehemently object to the holding of a religious service on any day except the traditional Sabbath although themselves spending the traditional Sabbath at their customary occupations. Christians will accept the New Testament teachings about hell fire and about the end of the world yet ignore the New Testament teachings about poverty and meekness. Seventh Day Adventists evince extraordinary scruple about observing the Old Testament Sabbath yet would not dream of observing the Old Testament teachings about circumcision, fringes, and the Levirate marriage. Examples could be cited *ad infinitum*. The idiosyncracies of selection in religious matters would constitute a sphere of inquiry unusually fascinating.

## V

In seeking these psychoanalytic undercurrents, be it noted, we are entering upon an entirely new departure. Religious discussion has hitherto circled around the scientific or the historical or, at the lowest, the politic value of given creeds and rites. Our concern is the psychoanalytic value. A doctrine may be objectionable from a scientific or historical standpoint and yet, like a dream image, or better, like an excellent novel, epic, or drama, express or arouse something of value in the unconscious sphere. These considerations are closely akin to

those involved in judging a work of art. The resurrection doctrine, for instance, may have an artistic or psychoanalytic value even though, taken as a scientific or historical statement, the doctrine may be revolting. Suppose that the resurrection belief chanced to indicate hidden longings to aid those who are handicapped by poverty, or suppose that the ritual of baptism should be found to be somehow interwoven with a sense of compassion for the aged, or suppose that a phrase like "the Holy Catholic Church" were to prove, upon analysis, to be linked with an unconscious resolve to live an orderly, systematic life; or suppose, conversely, that psychoanalysis were to detect at the unconscious foundations of a given doctrine, ritual, or phrase, or group of doctrines, rituals, and phrases, a sentiment of class pride, exclusiveness, and arrogance, or—as happens probably with regrettable frequency—an unwillingness to face the realities of life, a reluctance to discriminate between wish and fact. Is it not obvious that a psychoanalytic value may attach to a given doctrine ritual or phrase or group of such entirely different from the scientific or historical value?

Psychoanalysis has much to say about sublimation. Primitive tendencies, socially undesirable, such as promiscuity, cannibalism, and the like are, we are told, either repressed, often with pathological consequences, or are, under happier circumstances, sublimated by being discharged into channels of innocent diversion or of useful endeavor. Suppose that careful analysis were to show this benign process of sublimation expressed, assisted, or inspired by certain beliefs, rituals, and phrases. Since the days of Aristotle, a celebrated concept in art criticism has been that of the "Catharsis," "purification through pity and terror." Various religious beliefs, rituals, and phrases have undoubtedly voiced or exercised a similar cathartic propensity. Consider, for instance, the phrase about "the peace that passeth understanding." Does not some identity between the *catharsis* of Aristotle, the sublimation of psychotherapy and the "wonderful peace," "the healing grace"

of religion seem highly probable? Suppose now that certain properties of religion could be shown to aid (or to hinder) the work of sublimation. Is not this a feature requiring appraisal entirely independent of any scientific or historical estimate that the doctrine, ritual, or phrase may merit?

## VI

An appeal should be directed to all competent psychoanalysts, both in America and abroad, to send to some duly interested, qualified, and responsible individual or committee whatever findings with regard to the problems above mentioned they may encounter in the course of their psychoanalytic practice. The material should be collated, sifted, classified, and studied with a view to the ultimate publication or perhaps periodic publication of the results. Each stage of the research would probably produce new concepts, viewpoints, and bases of discrimination serviceable in subsequent research. It goes without saying that unusual caution will have to be exercised in dealing with the investigator's personal equation. Thoroughgoing objectivity is indispensable, any prejudice or bias, even unconscious, except with due allowance, being fatal to trustworthy results. Still it is not too much to hope that this procedure faithfully and consistently followed may either solve or at least throw new light upon the age-old problems of religious controversy and religious education.